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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NOUAKCHOTT 000379

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SUBJECT: LONG DETENTION PERIODS AND POOR CONDITIONS AT THE
"MAURITANIAN GUANTANAMO"

Classified By: Ambassador Mark M. Boulware for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Much has been said about the Nouadhibou illegal migrant detention center, also known popularly as "little Guantanamo" or "Guantanamoito." The detention center -- or "welcome center" as Mauritanian authorities refer to it -- houses illegal migrants intercepted at sea on their way to the Canary Islands or those rounded up in the streets of Nouadhibou and suspected of intending to travel to Europe. The migrants stay at the center while awaiting expulsion to the Malian or Senegalese border in buses transporting 15 to 20 people. Depending on the number of persons intercepted, detention periods can vary from 48 hours to over two weeks. While Amnesty International and the Spanish NGO CEAR have flagged poor conditions, overcrowding and mistreatment at the center, supporters claim the center helps those intercepted at sea who are weak and exhausted from the trip. They also defend the detentions on the grounds that they prevent people from undertaking the perilous trip and risking their lives. In a visit to the center, which at the time only housed eight migrants, EmbOffs saw deficient facilities and poor detention conditions. Although detainees did not complain about lack of food or mistreatment, most of them claimed they had been arbitrarily arrested and suffered from the long detention period, the impossibility of appealing to the authorities, their uncertain situations, and the world's lack of interest in their fate. End summary.

FOR AMNESTY, LACK OF LEGAL FRAMEWORK BREEDS ABUSE

12. (C) In its 2008 report "Mauritania: Nobody Wants To Have Anything To Do With Us," Amnesty International denounced ill-treatment and overcrowding in Nouadhibou's illegal migrant detention center, popularly known in Mauritania as "little Guantanamo" or "Guantanamoito." Amnesty said it feared that Mauritans, pressured by the European Union and Spain, had become "de facto policemen of Europe" and that the rights of migrants were suffering from the lack of legal frameworks to regulate detention activities and migration. In its report, Amnesty opposed detention and arbitrary arrests as migration control measures, and expressed concern about human rights violations, including the violation of refugee and asylum-seeker rights.

THE SPANISH PERSPECTIVE

13. (C) PolOff met May 17 with Spanish DCM Maria Clara Girbau, responsible for illegal immigration issues at the Spanish Embassy in Nouakchott. Girbau expressed her country's satisfaction with Mauritania's efforts in fighting illegal immigration and confirmed there has been a sharp decrease in the number of "boat people" leaving from Nouadhibou this year. Spain is providing patrolling services, technical assistance and training to help Mauritians fight illegal immigration networks and prosecute traffickers. She denied that migrants faced long detention periods at the detention center, and said they were transported to the Malian or Senegalese border and released within 48 hours of their detention. During the detention period, she said, Mauritanian authorities determined the migrants' nationality and whether or not they were involved in trafficking or could provide information about traffickers.

14. (C) Girbau stated illegal migrants were often young West African males and seemed surprised when PolOff informed her she had heard rumors of trafficking of women to the Canary Islands for prostitution purposes. She stressed Spain's main focus is preventing illegal migrants from entering Spain by boat and said she did not have much information about other organized trafficking networks. Girbau highlighted the work of international organizations like the International

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Organization for Migration (IOM) in helping Mauritania develop a much needed legal framework for Mauritanian migration issues. Comment: Girbau agreed to meet with PolOff but obtaining information from her was like pulling teeth. She appears to regard PolOff's interest in trafficking with suspicion. PolOff does not know whether Girbau's reluctance stems from a personality trait or Spanish policy. Repeated requests by PolOff to meet with Spanish Police Attache Juan Ortiz and with Spanish police in Nouadhibou have been ignored. End comment.

UNHCR'S PERSPECTIVE

15. (C) PolOff met May 27 with Edward O'Dwyer, protection officer for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to discuss the Nouadhibou detention center as well as trafficking in persons networks in Mauritania. O'Dwyer opened the meeting by highlighting a recent decrease in arrests of illegal migrants leaving from Nouadhibou to Europe. He explained the increased effectiveness of the Spanish-Mauritanian cooperation and the world economic crisis were powerful deterrents.

16. (C) O'Dwyer stated there have been instances when the Mauritanian authorities have expelled refugees and asylum seekers without any regard to their status. UNHCR has been successful in stopping some asylum seeker expulsions. He explained the expulsion of migrants had become a "numbers game" for Mauritanian authorities. In order to keep Spanish cooperation and training flowing, they have to show high numbers of expulsions to underscore their efficiency in tackling the problem. Therefore, O'Dwyer has heard reports of Mauritians rounding up large numbers of people and expelling them only to allow them to come back a few days later. O'Dwyer explained there was no legal framework for migration issues in Mauritania but only the outline of a national migration strategy. UNHCR is eager for the political situation to improve to continue working with the Mauritanian authorities in the development of an illegal alien law and a national identity card project.

17. (C) PolOff and PolAsst met with UNHCR Nouadhibou Deputy

Yahya Ould Mahmoud on May 31. He explained that the conditions at the detention center were no worse than the conditions faced by the general Mauritanian population. "The detention center is no hotel, but it is no Guantanamo either," he said. According to him, poor hygiene is the center's worse problem during periods of overcrowding. He stated that the center and the detentions are the only way to fight against illegal immigration. He explained the center provided medical attention to those rescued at sea, who are often dehydrated and sick. He said it also prevents people from losing their lives at sea. Mahmoud explained it is normal that migrants complain about the center because they are angry about the government thwarting their plans and also upset at losing their freedom for a short period of time. He said many of them denied they intended to travel illegally to Europe but they were mostly lying.

NEW FOCUS ON IDENTIFYING TRAFFICKERS

18. (C) Brigadier Abderrahmane Ould Habib, who works with immigration issues in Nouadhibou, told PolOff June 1 that the Mauritanian authorities were focusing more on identifying traffickers and cracking down on trafficking networks. He said this year many arrests of "passeurs" (French term for those who facilitate the passage) have been made but did not disclose a number. He explained many of the networks are run by the Senegalese or Malians in collaboration with Senegalese and Malians in Europe. Often, he said, family members who are in Europe send money to their relatives and put them in

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touch with a "passeur." He explained many migrants are scammed by their "passeurs," who collect fees from them but never intend to take them to Europe. Some are taken for a boat ride along the coast for a few hours and then dropped off on the beach.

A VISIT TO THE DETENTION CENTER

19. (C) PolOff and PolAsst visited the detention center in Nouadhibou on June 1. Formerly a school, the building has been adapted to house dormitories with very simple bunk beds. Classrooms, which serve as sleeping and living quarters, have been filled with up to 10 bunkbeds that sleep two people each. The conditions for detainees are no worse than those of average Mauritians. Nevertheless, they could be better, particularly because these people are deprived of their freedom and can spend long periods of time in detention. There are no covers or pillows and the men sleep on unmade beds. There were no chairs, fans, radios or televisions, and the detainees spend the day locked up in their dormitory without access to a recreational area or activities. It is easy to imagine how conditions can worsen considerably when the center is overcrowded.

110. (C) In 2008, EmbOffs were told, the center could house as many as 300 detainees at a given time. In the past few months, Mauritania has seen a sharp decrease in the number of immigrants leaving from Nouadhibou, and only eight detainees from Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Tanzania were held in custody at the time of EmbOffs' visit. (Comment: Incredibly, one of the Tanzanians stated he had traveled by boat for 18 days from South Africa all the way to Mauritania. End comment.) The men complained about the long detention period and were angry they were being held "without justification." One of them had been there for as long as two weeks and saw no end in sight. The UNHCR representative explained the government needed at least 15 detainees to fill the bus that would drive them to the Rosso border. Finding 15 people to expel was taking time and detention periods had become longer as a result.

¶11. (C) When asked if they had been detained at sea attempting to reach the Canary Islands, most of them stated they had been detained in the streets of Nouadhibou. Some of them denied intending to cross over to Europe or making preparations to cross over. They said they had been working in Nouadhibou and some stated their papers were in order. They said they had been trying to contact their Embassies to no avail and had asked for help. Note: The detainees are allowed one phone call when they arrive to the center. Most use the phone call to call their families back home. End note.

¶12. (C) EmbOffs inspected the rest of the facilities. Detainees have access to proper bathrooms and showers. They did not complain of hunger and said "food was not a problem." Note: Meals are funded and delivered by the Spanish Red Cross and the Mauritanian Red Crescent. End note. Two of the detainees were sick and unsatisfied with medical care received. One of them had a swollen mouth and explained the doctor had given him medication a few weeks ago but his condition had not improved. Another complained of skin rashes. The men seemed distressed and anxious by the long detention period and the uncertainty. PolOff reassured the Senegalese and the Malians that they would soon be sent back home but they responded they were anguished because they had no money for the trip from the border to their villages. Comment: EmbOffs were informed the Tanzanians would be taken to the Senegalese borders as well. EmbOffs wonder what will become of them once in Senegal, and how they will make their way back home. End comment.

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COMMENT

¶13. (C) Conditions at the center are not dire but are poor and could be improved, particularly because this detention center is a European-driven endeavor. A report by independent Spanish NGO CEAR called for the center's "immediate closing" given the poor conditions and the lack of resources to improve them. CEAR also talked about the precarious situation of migrants given the lack of laws regulating illegal immigration. EmbOffs concur with CEAR and Amnesty International that the lack of legal framework poses risks of abuses.
BOULWARE